Clare Peyce's Diary

A. WARNER HULL

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AN OLD MAID'S HISTORY

BY

A. WARNER HULL

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PREFACE.

FROM a firm conviction that some of the best and noblest women have never married, this little volume sprang into existence. Even in these practical times, beneath apparently commonplace lives there is often an under-current of romance outweighing the wildest efforts of fiction; and buried in the heart of many an old maid lies a history the world little dreams of. Spoken of lightly perhaps—may be, not spoken of at all—but none the less true and unselfish because it did *not* end in 'marrying and living happily ever after.'

MY DIARY.

April 3rd.

It's awfully stupid and slow to-day!
  Mamma has refused the De Guestenay's ball.
It's downright provoking! I'm in such a way,
  And long for that pet of a Harold to call.
The waltzes I'd promised and saved up for him!
  I felt quite convinced that at last he'd propose;
And now it's all done for, through some foolish whim,
  And how I am fidgeting nobody knows!

To-morrow, it seems, we are going to dine
  With some one or other (they're strangers to me),
To meet the Mark Smythes and a cousin of mine,
  My rich merchant cousin, the Chesney M.P.

It's years since we've seen him ; in fact, I can't say
  If I've ever seen him, 'tis so long ago ;
I seem to remember he called here one day
  When I was about four—he twenty or so.

I daresay they'll all nearly bore me to death,
  But grumbling's no use, for go with them I must,
And grumbling to ma is just wasting my breath.
  That I shall survive it, I fervently trust ;
As a matter of principle, I'll look my best.
  I'll send round and see if my new dress is done—
I'm awfully taking when really well dressed.
  Suppose he is smitten! oh gracious, what fun !

April 4th.

I just snatch a moment to sit down and write,
  That Harold has called, as I hoped for, to-day ;
We weren't left alone, but he squeezed my hand *tight*,
  As much as to hint he had something to say.
Young Hamilton passed, too, and gave such a bow—
  He isn't quite heartwhole I know very well.
Good gracious, it's six ! I must go and dress now,
  And show my dear cousin the Sevenoaks belle.

Apru 5th.

We had such a glorious evening last night,
  I did so enjoy it ! yet hardly know why :
There were only our hostess, her sister Miss White,
  The Mark Smythes, my cousin, mamma, pa, and I.
My cousin is forty if he is a day,
  As handsome a man, though, as you'd wish to see ;
He talked to mamma most, yet still, in his way,
  I thought he was rather attentive to me.

He's five or six children, it seems, of his own ;
  He's now been a widower nearly three years ;
He spoke of his loss—and his living alone,
  And the tone of his voice almost moved me to tears.
What rubbish it is to write thus ! but it's true ;
  His children no doubt are all left to run wild ;
He's asked me to stay with them—so I will too,
  But I hope he don't look upon me as a child !

I talked well last night, not mere rubbish and stuff,
  As I might had my cousin been likely to flirt,
But sensible talk, staid and proper enough
  For the highest-dried bore, whoe'er buttoned a shirt.

I went in for politics, literature, art,
  Ah ! and science as well, as I can if I choose ;
It was playing, I own, a most venturesome part,
  But I fancy his lordship admires the 'blues.'

At any rate now he can't think me a fool,
  Though twice in the evening that horrid Miss White
Asked me if I was out? and if I had left school?
  I'm sure it was nothing but envy and spite.
She's trying to catch Cousin Clifton I know,
  As if he would have *her*—a vicious old maid!
She's thirty, satirical, 'blue,'—oh ! no ! no !
  He'll never care for her—*I* am not afraid.

April 6th.
,, *7th.*
,, *8th.*

My cousin Clifton called to-day,
  He's very handsome if not young,
He's asked me there again to stay—
  Why did I blush and hold my tongue?
Am I?—good gracious, it's absurd—
  The fact is I was rather shy,
That must be it—upon my word
  I don't know what it is—not I—

But Cousin Clifton seems to be
So different from other men,
A sort of demigod to me,
I have such fancies now and then.
And he's so clever and so wise,
So worshipped by all sorts of sets,
I'd like to stand well in his eyes,
Though Harold *is* my pet of pets.

April 9th.
,, 10*th.*

I went out for a stroll to-day,
For as my cousin still is here,
I thought he too might walk that way,
But Miss White booked him—never fear.

Oh ! Harold called while I was out,
And really I was rather glad,
He's fond of me, I have no doubt,
But I can't marry such a lad.

He's very, very nice, but then
He's barely three-and-twenty yet ;
I don't like juvenile young men—
They're all such youngsters in our set.

April 11*th*.
,, 12*th*.
,, 13*th*.

My cousin called to say good-bye,
And hoped when next I wanted change,
That I should be induced to try
The Surrey air at Morecomb Grange.

I thanked him in my sweetest tone,
And then he hoped it would be soon ;
I fancied, had we been alone,
He almost would have tried to spoon.

And then before he went away,
My guardian angel made him speak
The words I longed for—'Fix the day'—
And so I fixed it for next week.

Mamma consented, like a duck,
What care I for that stupid ball !
Clare Peyce, my love, you are in luck !
One thing, though, made me rather small.

He seemed so anxious I should go,
  I thought 'Perhaps he'll squeeze my hand.'
I looked down when I gave it—*no*,
  That style he doesn't understand.

Still colouring, I raised my eyes,
  And he looked back at me again,
So quietly—half in surprise—
  He must have thought me very vain.

He isn't smitten—no, not he!—
  No more than is yon kingly sun
Enamoured of that droning bee—
  He beams alike on every one.

April 14*th.*
,, 15*th.*
,, 16*th.*
,, 17*th.*
,, 18*th.*
,, 19*th.*
,, 20*th.*

Morecomb Grange.

Arrived at five o'clock to-day.
  Pa saw me safely to the change;
The carriage met me there half way;
  So here I am at Morecomb Grange.

It is a fine old country seat,
  Built in the second Charles' time,
With grace and dignity replete—
  It seems but now just in its prime.

The stairs are all of polished oak,
  And all the corridors as well,
But walking on it is no joke,
  For twice to-day I nearly fell.

My room looks down the avenue;
  And far beyond the chestnut trees,
There is a most bewitching view,
  That any artist's eye would please.

I am not staying here alone,
  For Clifton's sister—Cousin Jane,
It seems, has come, as chaperone—
  I hope and trust she won't remain.

I know we shan't get on at all,
  However hard each of us tries;
She's dashing, rather dark, thin, tall,
  With cold, keen piercing light grey eyes.

Grey eyes that read one through and through,
  And find one's weak points out with zest,
That doubt if truth itself is true—
  I like the children much the best!

The eldest boy's away at school,
  A handsome lad, if like his carte;
A troublesome young dog to rule,
  Old nurse says, though she takes his part.

The next are two precocious girls,
  Just like their mother, I am told,
With masses of soft flaxen curls—
  One twelve, the other ten years old.

Then come two wild young Turks of boys,
  Good friends *we're* safe and sure to be,
In spite of all their pranks and noise,
  For boys take readily to me.

Then there's the 'baby,' four years old,
  Spoiled by them all, so much the worse;
She seems thought worth her weight in gold,
  By that fond, fussy old head nurse.

My cousin dined with us at eight,
  Left for the HOUSE at half-past nine,
And—but it's getting very late;
  I will not write another line.

April 21st.

I've seen the children's pets and toys,
  And helped Jane in *attempts* to talk;
Then I, the governess, the boys,
  Baby and nurse, went for a walk.

Nurse is a comely brisk old dame,
  Who loves the children like her life;
Just thirty years ago she came,
  Nursemaid to Cousin Clifton's wife.

She married, widowed in a year,
  Back to her post she came again;
When Clifton married, she came here,
  And here in state she holds her reign.

The governess is rather shy,
  And holds nurse in the greatest awe;
While nurse in deference *will* vie,
  And treats Miss Barker's word as law.

'Twould be great fun to watch them both,
  Only one must respect them too,
They seem bound by a solemn oath
  To Clifton's interests to be true.

So each upholds the other's sway,
  For fear the children should rebel;
To judge from what I saw to-day
  They manage matters pretty well.

They all seem pleased to have me here—
  Not so my worthy Cousin Jane;
She says, 'You find it dull, I fear,'
  As if I wanted to complain!

She is *so* civil and polite,
  In quiet, keep-your-distance style;
I *hate* those eyes so steely bright,
  I *hate* her calm contemptuous smile.

It seems, I'm sure I can't tell why,
  As though she were my adverse fate—
I try to bear it pleasantly.
  I do hope Clifton won't be late!

April 22nd.

Jane's husband join'd us here last night,
A quiet, unassuming man,
Who thinks that all she does is right;
I'll imitate him, *if I can.*

We dined, and then I played and sang—
With Clifton by, I am content.
At ten o'clock the prayer-bell rang;
And that was how the evening went.

April 23rd. Sunday.
,, *24th.*

To-night we'd company to dine,
And Clifton got down here by three;
It may be but a 'fad' of mine,
But he does seem so proud of me.

This evening, just as I was dressed,
I heard a voice call, 'Cousin Clare!
Papa says, mind you look your best—
He's sent some flowers for your hair.'

April 25th.

A Mr. Reille dined here to-night—
  Jane's husband was detained in town ;
As usual, she was full of spite,
  And quite prepared to 'set me down.'

They had to go up to the House,
  I let them talk away—those three,
And sat still as a little mouse,
  Till Cousin Clifton turned to me.

'Well, Clare, what do *you* say?' and then
  I talked, because he liked to hear.
It seemed to please both gentlemen,
  But Cousin Jane said, with a sneer :

'Twelve years I've been a member's wife,
  And never heard my husband lay
The law down thus—once in his life,
  As Clare has laid it down to-day.

'But then Charles is a clever man,
  And, like me, hates all false pretence.'
'Yes,' Clifton said, 'the wisest plan,
  For those who can't like Clare, talk sense.

'Clifton, my dear, you'll turn Clare's head,
She thinks that compliment is *meant.*'
Angrily starting up, he said,
'Come, Reille! it is high time we went;

'The train goes at eighteen past nine;
Good evening, Jane; good evening, Clare;
What sort of night, Jones? wet or fine?
Come, Reille! we have no time to spare.'

The hall door shut with *such* a bang,
Jane sighed and gently shook her head;
And then she tatted, and I sang,
And then we yawned, and went to bed.

April 26th.
,, *27th.*

I talked of going home to-day,
But Clifton scouted the idea;
So as he presses, I shall stay—
It's very jolly being here.

To see how partial he's to me
Requires but very little 'nouse;'
He's always home to early tea,
And more than once has shirked the House.

Each day is very like the last,
  Breakfast, write letters, luncheon, drive,
Then callers—old, young, slow or fast,
  A yawning fit, and tea at five.

Then Clifton, dinner, music, tea,
  And then a boring talk with Jane.
With him here, time goes joyously,
  But she is Pleasure's very bane.

This morning, as we sat at work,
  She asked me if I knew Miss White.
I thought I saw a slight smile lurk
  About her mouth—and I was right.

I answered 'Yes;' but why should she
  Give her lip that contemptuous curl?
'A charming girl,' she said; (to me
  She really didn't seem a *girl*).

'Perhaps she is,' was my reply;
  'Extremely self-conceited, too;
It's time she laid girls' graces by
  At her age—thirty-one or two.'

And then she looked me through and through
With those grey eyes, so keen and cold.
'You thought her *passée*, then, and blue,
Yet thirty isn't very old.'

I felt annoyed—I don't know why—
My face flushed up as hot as hot;
'I didn't like her much,' said I.
She slightly smiled, 'I dare say not.'

I hate that cool contemptuous smile,
That hints, but will not tell outright;
I asked her, in a little while,
'But why should I not like Miss White?'

'Oh! have you never heard the tale?
Miss White loved Clifton long ago.
But where two strive, the one must fail,
And he chose Eleanor Defoe.

'And that was a mistake at best—
Camilla White is more his style.
Ah, well! poor Eleanor's at rest,
'Twill come right in a little while.

'Camilla's single, and no doubt
  This time she'll try, and will succeed;
I'm sure *I'll* try to help her out—
  I wish it from my heart indeed.

'Clever, accomplished, she will make
  A wife who well may be his pride;
I wish it for poor Clifton's sake,
  And those poor children's'—then she sighed.

'I think I'll go and smooth my hair;
  It's nearly lunch time,' I replied.
I rushed up to my room, and there
  I sat down like a goose, and—cried.

April 28th.
,, *29th.*
,, *30th.*
May 1st.
,, *2nd.*

At last I sit down to record,
  The happiest evening of my life;
A tale of joy—with every word,
  With hope and love and longing rife.

Jane and her spouse dined out to-day,
  And as they were not home till late,
For once, I had it all my way,
  And dined with Clifton tête-à-tête.

Reaching from ceiling to the floor,
  Each side the dining-room, are two
Large mirrors, where one sees twice o'er
  The whole room at a single view.

I sat quite proper and straight-laced,
  While Gregory and Jones were by,
But longed to see how we looked, placed
  As master he, as mistress I.

I waited till a good chance came,
  Then glanced—but oh! I felt so wild,
Clifton had done the very same,
  Our eyes met—I blushed and he smiled.

'We don't look badly matched,' he said;
  'I think we could dispense with Jane;
With you, Clare, at the table-head,
  The old house looks like *home* again.'

My heart seemed suddenly to rise,
  And throb till I could *hear* each beat;
I did not dare to raise my eyes,
  'Twas almost painful, 'twas so sweet.

I tried to speak—oh! when did I
  Sit tongue-tied 'gainst my will before?
I, who am famed for coquetry,
  And count flirtations by the score?

Speechless, with heart and cheeks aglow,
  I learned what real true love is worth;
'Twas like a dream—I only know
  That Heaven itself seems come to earth.

The spell, however, was but brief,
  For Cousin Clifton spoke again,
And (it was almost a relief)
  This time in quite a different strain.

But in the library alone,
  Waiting for him to come to tea,
I marked the softness of the tone
  In which he said those words to me.

Well matched ! he handsome, stout and tall,
  With those strong arms and great broad chest ;
And I so delicate and small—
  I think I should come off the best.

The hours like minutes seemed to flee,
  For Time in bliss had steeped his wings ;
I sang, and then he read to me,
  And then we talked of different things.

A vase of early mignonette
  With chastened fragrance filled the room ;
We did not talk of love, and yet
  Love seemed linked with its soft perfume.

I wonder, as the years roll by,
  If I shall feel most joy or pain,
When, like a flood of memory,
  That scent is borne to me again.

He loves me !—not that he *said* so
  By word or sign, however slight ;
But my heart tells me, for I know
  I ne'er was happy till to-night.

. . . . . .

Then came a rude awakening shock,
  Just when joy's torch most brightly burned,
'Twas the loud double 'footman's' knock,
  Which told the Courtenays had returned.

May 3rd.
,, *4th.*
,, *5th.*

Went for our usual drive to-day,
  I thought we chatted rather more,
For Jane was gracious in her way ;
  We got back here at half-past four.

Jones spoke to us as we went through,
  'Miss Seton, ma'am, has been to call;
And there's a letter, miss, for you—
  It's on the table in the hall.'

'What, only one?' I said, 'no more !
  Clifton has plenty, by-the-by ;'
I turned his over, three or four,
  One, in an instant, caught my eye.

'Twas clearly in a woman's hand,
  What could a woman have to write?
'Twas dainty, scented, monogrammed
  C. W.—Camilla White!

If there had been a single soul
  At hand just then to whom to speak,
I should have had more self-control,
  And not have been so blindly weak.

But as it was, with Jane so near,
  Whose presence always seems a blight,
I held the letter up, 'Look here,'
  I said, 'C. W.—Miss White.'

'Why not?' she languidly replied,
  Not looking *at* me, but beyond;
''Tis three years since poor Nellie died,
  So surely they may correspond.'

She turned, and slowly walked away;
  Slowly I followed, with a pain
I never felt before to-day,
  Numbing my very heart and brain.

Oh ! would to God I had not seen
  That hateful letter lying there ;
Yet had I not, there 'twould have been,
  And, after all, why need *I* care ?

May 6th.
,, *7th. Sunday.*
This evening, just after tea,
  Clifton was sitting by my side,
He jumped up rather restlessly
  And threw the window open—wide.

'Twas like a warm midsummer night,
  The sky was one dark vault of blue,
And bathed in floods of soft moonlight
  Were lawn and chestnut avenue.

A few stars glittered here and there—
  Diana's maidens coy and pale—
And thrilling in the perfumed air,
  The sweet notes of the nightingale.

We all sat listening silently
  To those clear strains soft rise and fall,
When Clifton whispered quietly,
  'Clare, send Eliza for a shawl.

A walk can't hurt you, it's so warm.'
  Of course, Jane said I should take cold;
But, deaf to her, I took his arm,
  Sent for a shawl, and out we strolled.

We sauntered down the avenue,
  And lingered talking at the gate;
I can't think how the moments flew,
  I never guessed it was so late.

I stood there, fully satisfied,
  Absorbed in one sweet dream of bliss,
For Clifton drew me to his side,
  And then our lips met in a kiss.

A voice behind us made us start;
  'Are you not coming in again?'
I turned, and, with a sinking heart,
  Saw Mr. Courtenay and Jane.

How long she'd been there I don't know,
  But very likely all the time;
Really, until she told me so,
  I never thought a walk a crime.

But, shown up in its proper light,
  Remorse my guilty conscience stings ;
Of course immaculate Miss White
  Would never do such shocking things.

'Clifton ! how could you loiter so ?
  Oh ! please come in the shortest way ;
It struck eleven long ago !
  Whatever will the servants say ?'

Thus, and much more, quoth Jane ; we went
  Back to the house, the prayers were read,
And then 'good-night.' I am content ;
  I hope she is, and now to bed.

May 8th.

As I went to my room to-night,
  The nursery door was just ajar ;
I heard nurse say, 'She and Miss White
  Are very much upon a par.'

I listened, then I heard *my* name ;
  Ay, the old proverb's true indeed !
Perhaps, perhaps I was to blame !
  But what I heard made my heart bleed.

'Miss Peyce!' shrieked nurse, 'oh dear! oh dear
I'm sure I hope it's no such thing;
If a young mistress enters here
I know the misery it will bring.

'Those children need such firm control,
A girl like her will never do;
Miss White's the best, upon the whole,
And then they are first cousins too.'

'Oh bother take that!' Susan said,
'Do let poor master have his way;
With Miss Peyce at the table-head,
The old house would be always gay.

'We're not all old, you know, like you;
I'd like to have dull times improve;
You mark my words, you'll find it true,
Our master's head and ears in love.

'A handsome fellow, too, like him,
Deserves a handsome wife, it's clear;
You look so awful cross and grim,
That you don't want a missus here.'

'Oh! Susan it is self, self, self,
  And always self with such as you;
There! put those books back on the shelf—
  Do something for your living, do!

'It don't become you, who're so young,
  With master's name to be so free;
You'll learn, my girl, to hold your tongue,
  When you have lived as long as me.

'It's all but settled with Miss White,
  'Twas Mrs. Courtenay told me *that*;
But don't talk of it, 'tisn't right,
  To make it food for kitchen chat.

'If Missie makes him change his mind,
  It won't be long afore it's known;
But if she does, I think she'll find
  She'd better have left well alone.

'If she does marry him, there'll be
  One wretched heart amongst the lot;
And that's the master's—deary me,
  They'd all be wretched, like as not.

'For Missie's a kind-hearted soul,
  And wouldn't like to be too hard,
And master likes such strict control,
  That all her projects would be marred.

'The children would nigh break her heart;
  Then master he'd be harsh and vexed;
First take hers, then the children's part—
  We all know what would happen next.

'For all their sakes, I hope he'll find
  Some one much older than Miss Peyce;
Some one decided, firm, yet kind,
  Who'll keep each in their proper place.

'But never Missie—God forbid!
  She means no harm I know, not she;
Young folks don't guess what grief lies hid
  As long as things look pleasantly.

'She's pretty, aye, a sweeter face
  Ne'er blushed upon a summer's day;
There's few who wouldn't like Miss Peyce—
  She's lots of sweethearts, I daresay.

'She'll pick up one soon, never fear;
  For, deary, 'twould make my heart sore,
If she should come as mistress here,
  Oh! Susan, speak of it no more.

'I wish I'd died when mistress died,
  If I must ever live to see
Poor little Missie master's bride,
  And hers and master's misery.'

I walked up here, as in a trance,
  Then flung myself upon the floor,
And o'er my shattered sweet romance
  Wept as I never wept before.

Each cruel word was strictly true,
  And *Love* lay stretched upon his bier;
What *duty* was, too well I knew,
  Oh! would it were not quite so clear.

Jane's withering sneer and crushing smile,
  My own conviction—which is worse;
And, as the torch that lights the pile,
  The rambling words of good old nurse.

I'm better now—quite calm again ;
  I've vowed a solemn vow to-night,
That though it cause me lifelong pain,
  I'll *force* myself to do the right.

The fearful test may never come,
  And oh! God grant it never may ;
But soon as can be, I'll go home—
  It is the best, the safest, way.

I'll do my part—but with those words
  All sunshine fades from out my life ;
To breaking stretched are my heart's chords !
  Break, if thou wilt, heart, in the strife !

That is not *love*, which grasping takes
  With eager hands love's hoarded pelf ;
The heart that *loves* in anguish breaks,
  Before it gives a thought to self.

Oh ! Clifton ! Clifton ! am I mad ?
  No, but I love you more than life.
What matters *my* path being sad,
  If *you* are happy with your wife.

Choose her who is so wise and good ;
  To your old love keep leal and true ;
And, though it costs my heart's best blood,
  'Tis gladly given Love for you.

And yet I would that I could die,
  While all my pulses warmly beat,
And, like the swan's one melody,
  Find life's last sighs sublimely sweet.

I've lived till I have tasted *life*,
  I've loved till I am cool and brave ;
And since I cannot be your wife,
  I'll seek my bridal in the grave.

My own, my darling, that one kiss
  My lips for evermore will thrill;
My heart has sung one psalm of bliss,
  Now till eternity 'tis still.

May 9th.

This evening I said to Jane
  'Twas time I bade them all good-bye ;
Clifton still pressed me to remain,
  But I withstood him valiantly.

Jane said, in her most dulcet voice,
'Oh! really, *must* you run away?
Clifton, my dear, leave Clare a choice—
You hear, she doesn't *wish* to stay.'

I coloured up, and so did he—
I felt so miserably hot;
Murmured mamma was wanting me,
Or else—oh there! I don't know what.

I know I looked a perfect fool,
And Clifton looked annoyed and vexed,
And Jane looked unconcerned and cool,
Till I guessed what would happen next.

She stroked me softly on the cheek,
'Ah! my wise little Cousin Clare,
No doubt you're wanted home this week—
There's powerful attraction there.

'The only wonder is, to me,
How you have kept so long away;
Two letters, eh? an H and G—
I think they stand for Harold Grey.'

Oh! those keen steely searching eyes—
  What depths they held of hidden spite!
I said, she saw my temper rise,
  'Did that come from your friend, Miss White?'

She smiled. 'Camilla White, my dear,
  Has better work, I hope, to do,
Than send your village gossip here—
  I found the matter out from you.'

'From me,' I cried; 'I'd almost swear
  I've never mentioned Harold Grey.'
She answered, 'C'est une autre affaire;
  It isn't what young ladies *say*.

'It's what they hint, and look, and sigh,
  And when they blush, and then turn pale,
That one can read so easily
  A certain interesting tale.'

'Twas either Mark Smythe, or his wife,
  Or Miss White, put her up to this;
I've never blushed, I'll stake my life—
  I'm no young sentimental miss.

Besides, since I saw Clifton first,
  I've never thought of Harold Grey;
She knows it, too, and that's the worst,
  Because she sees which card to play.

I tried to argue—'twas in vain,
  She parried everything I said;
I gave it up, and once again
  I wished at heart that I was dead.

But two days will pass quickly by,
  And when I'm once at home again
I shall learn to bear patiently
  The torture of this secret pain.

May 10*th.*
,, 11*th.*
,, 12*th.*

How can I write, with thoughts astray!
  How can I write, with heart grown cold!
And yet the tale of yesterday,
  My life's great epoch, *must* be told.

Jane went out for her usual drive,
  I said I'd go—then changed my mind;
Clifton was *never* home till five,
  So I might safely stay behind.

I told her that I had to pack,
  It was but an excuse I own,
I meant to sit, till she came back;
  In the old library—*alone.*

I tried to read—my throbbing brain
  Refused to grasp the simplest theme;
I tried to write—'twas all in vain,
  It seemed like writing in a dream.

Restless and sad I fetched my work—
  The clock had just chimed half-past three,
When the door opened with a jerk—
  Clifton stood face to face with me!

'Well, Clare,' he said, 'see, I've cut town,
  I thought you wouldn't drive to-day;
Jane's out of course—that's well—sit down,
  I've something, dear, I want to say.'

It had been coming long, I knew,
  And now at length the time had come;
There were no others save us two,
  And he spoke on, and I was dumb.

'Twas quickly said—he did not waste
  The words that made my pale cheeks burn;
Besides, he said, he spoke in haste,
  Fearing that Jane might soon return.

Each syllable he uttered fell
  Like living fire upon my heart,
But I had schooled myself too well
  To falter with my bitter part.

'I build my hopes, dear Clare,' he said,
  'On all that passed the other night;'
So then I laughed, and tossed my head,
  And asked him—how about Miss White?

I wished to make him think I chose
  To treat the matter as a joke;
He bit his lips, his colour rose,
  And for a second neither spoke.

At last he said, 'I'll tell the truth,
  Miss White has loved me, Clare, for years;
For love of me she spent her youth
  In unavailing sighs and tears.

'For love of me she's single yet,
  From her heart's shrine she could not tear
The lover she will ne'er forget
  And place another idol there.

'Words cannot tell her kindness when
  Poor Eleanor fell ill and died;
I must have been the worst of men
  If I had not felt gratified.

'Since then Jane told me all her tale,
  And as I once again was free,
I felt this time I must not fail
  The one who'd loved so patiently.

'She's brilliant, clever, and well read,
  Just in her prime at thirty-three,
A splendid figure, lovely head,
  And more than all—she's fond of me!

'As yet the offer's but *implied*—
I've drawn up, but not signed the bond;
Although to keep her satisfied
At intervals we correspond.

'In *honour*, Clare, I'm bound to keep
To my implied gage staunch and true;
But honour's guard is lull'd asleep
If I but turn to *look* at you.

'In your hands lies my future life,
For Honour fails with Love to cope;
Camilla cannot be my wife
Till you deny a gleam of hope.

'But if you love me, darling, *speak*—
The promise I have made to her
Is not so binding but 'twill break.'
He paused; my heart was all astir.

My brain whirled round, and in my ear
I heard old nurse's accents ring—
'If a young mistress enters here,
I know the misery it will bring.

'Those children need such strict control.'
  I knew—I felt the bitter truth,
And in my very inmost soul
  I cursed the only bar—my youth.

I could not speak; he spoke again:
  'Clare, dear, I wait for your reply.'
And then I answered, mad with pain,
  (Oh! God forgive me for the lie)—

'I cannot love you'—'twas the best,
  The best for him, the best for all;
I felt it was—but in my breast
  All happiness seemed turned to gall.

He answered something, but I dared
  Not listen, for he pleaded hard;
Nor he, nor I that hour I spared
  Though all my life by it was marred.

I closed my ears to what he said,
  Crushed down my foolish aching heart,
I curled my lip, and tossed my head,
  Right cleverly I played my part!

At last he took my trembling hand.
'Clare! once again I bid you choose,
And let me clearly understand—
Do you accept me or refuse?'

I smiled, and tried to smile in scorn.
'If ere I marry, it must be
A man rich, handsome, and well born,
But—only twenty-two or three.'
He winced; I saw he felt the thorn,
It was some comfort—*that*—to me.

He looked me through, and through, and through—
One minute more, I should have cried,
'Oh! Clifton, darling, I love *you*,
Far more than all the world beside.'

But not another word said he,
And so that searching look I braved;
And then he left me, silently,
And thus his happiness was saved!

'Twas done. Deliberately I wrought
The deed that crushed my future life.
Existence seemed lost in the thought
I never now can be his wife!

I followed him as in a dream—
  The room seemed whirling round and round—
Strange lights seemed dazzlingly to gleam;
  I walked, but did not feel the ground.

I did not cry, I had no tears,
  I have none now—their silent balm
Lies hidden in far future years;
  But now, oh! I am very calm.

'Twas not so dreadful as I feared,
  From my heart's gash the life-blood streamed;
But now with red hot iron 'tis seared,
  And it is only deeply seamed.

The danger's over—it is done!
  And let me rue it as I may,
The battle's fought, the victory won—
  I cannot call back yesterday.

Clifton has not been home to-night;
  To-morrow by an early train
I leave, and then Camilla White
  May choose her wedding dress with Jane.

God bless them both! my every prayer
  Asks blessings on their future life.
God bless their footsteps everywhere!
  'Miss White' is lost in 'Clifton's wife.'

May 20th. Sevenoaks.

I have been home a week to-day,
  A week since my heart's tale was closed;
This very morning Harold Grey
  Met me out walking, and proposed.

I pitied him as I said 'No!'
  Just 'no,' for I could say no more;
'Tis such a little while ago
  That I that bitter anguish bore.

He said that I had changed my mind,
  He thought *I* was above caprice;
I tried my utmost to be kind,
  But failed, and failing held my peace.

I had no spirits to say much,
  For gathering tears made my eyes dim;
I held my hand out, and its touch
  Told more than words I grieved for him.

We understood each other then,
  For as we stood there, hand in hand,
He said, 'Ah! Clare, I asked *since when*
  You'd changed, but now I understand.

'I should have spoken long ago,
  'Tis my own folly I've to blame;
You won't quite cut me.' 'Oh! no, no!
  We'll be friends always just the same.'

And so we parted, each love crushed,
  Each heart with its best angel flown;
Not happy lovers, proud and flushed,
  But saddened, hopeless, and alone.

Oh! hearts that daily throb and beat
  With all lost that made *living*, *life*,
Not daring to call memory sweet,
  Teach me how best to bear the strife!

May 27th.

Another week has passed away!
  I have no heart for anything,
Existence drags on day by day—
  I hate these sunny days of spring.

All Nature wakes to life and light,
  Rejoicing, yet *I* must repine;
The flowers forget their wintry night—
  I only live to dwell on mine.

Oh! would, oh! would that I were dead,
  Far from repining grief and pain;
Lay down to-night my weary head,
  And never wake on earth again.

They say I'm paler every day,
  Mamma is very very kind,
Papa says in his joking way,
  'Why, Clare! you've left your heart behind.'

They dose with iron and quinine,
  Port wine and jelly, say the spring
Is trying, talk of change of scene
  Rousing me, and that kind of thing.

No one I'm sure suspects the truth,
  Unless our doctor's practised eye
Has caught a something that mere youth
  And trying springs don't justify.

'Don't fidget her,' he said one day,
  'It's more her nerves, there's nothing wrong;
Just pet her, give her her own way,
  She'll be all right again ere long.'

June 14th.

As we were breakfasting to-day,
  Mamma remarked the post was late;
'Oh! no!' said Tom, 'he's been our way,
  I saw a letter on Clare's plate.'

'Indeed!' mamma said, 'and who from?
  Who is your correspondent, Clare?'
'Ah! who indeed, ma,' struck in Tom—
  'A London postmark's anywhere.

'You should have seen her snatch it up;'
  Just then I caught my father's eye,
My hand shook, I upset my cup,
  And stammered, 'I'll explain by-and-by.'

'Hullo!' roared Tom, 'oh! what a mess!
  You clumsy girl! ma, just look here!'
But she said, 'Clare, I must confess
  I think this letter business queer.

'Whatever mystery can it be?'
  'There is no mystery,' said I;
''Twas cousin Clifton wrote to me,
  The rest I'll tell you by-and-by.'

That altered everything; ma smiled,
  Papa looked knowing. 'What a lark!'
Screamed Tom, 'you idiotic child,
  To try and keep *me* in the dark.'

'Be quiet, Tom, and do not tease,'
  Mamma said; 'let your sister be.'
At last I gained my room in peace
  To read what he has said to me.

A wild vague hope I know I nursed,
  And with it too a sickening fear;
At last I broke the seal, for worst
  Or best; I knew my fate was here!

For no mere trivial cause he'd write,
  Whate'er it be to Fate I bow.
'Tis as I thought—Camilla White
  Is his betrothed; all's over now.

He writes : 'I made a great mistake
  To dream you'd ever fancy me ;
Your heart is hardly wide awake,
  And mine told out to forty-three.

'It was a foolish dream of mine ;
  Forgive, forget it, cousin Clare ;
Forgive, forget, and write a line
  To say we are the friends we were.

'And if you ever need a friend
  To help or serve you *any* way,
Remember, you have but to send,
  And I'll be with you night or day.

'My last request was wild, 'tis true ;
  But friendship you can freely take ;
Take, then, what I now offer you,
  For my and for Camilla's sake.'

He never loved as I have loved !
  He could not, thus to write to me !
So cold, so satisfied, unmoved,
  Could *I*? with all my misery.

She has his *heart*, his *fancy* I,
  And he has both our very lives—
A fair exchange! Society
  Would scarcely sanction both as wives.

Yet why be bitter! it is best
  To dash the past at once aside,
And tear for ever from my breast
  The sting of disappointed pride.

His friend! ah yes! his wounded pride,
  The rankling darts Love leaves behind;
His brilliant hopes, his stylish bride,
  Could never make him ought but kind.

His friend! ah yes! in life and death;
  Nay more than death—eternity;
No more nor less, by one hair's breadth,
  Just friend, and only friend, to me.

He is the wisest! till life ends
  We're knit by a new sacred tie;
Love is forgotten, trusted *friends*
  We'll meet without regret or sigh.

June 18*th.*

The news has very quickly spread;
  This afternoon Tom met Miss White;
He says he's sure it's turned her head,
  She was so radiant with delight.

Radiant! why all that life can hold
  Is poured into her willing hands;
And Love has woven a web of gold,
  With diamond woof and sunshine strands.

Sorrow for her can never come,
  Or come robbed of its sharpest sting;
His wife! *his* darling! peace and home—
  Radiant! why, she has everything.

And I? I might have had it all,
  Yet I have acted for the best;
The crumbs at least to my share fall,
  For by my hand two lives are blest.

Be still, my heart! nor dare repine,
  One grand sweet solace ne'er forget;
'Twas for his peace I bartered mine—
  That leaves no room for vain regret!

August 17th.

Two months ago since I wrote last!
  The wedding's over; they will soon
(Time flies on such swift pinions past)
  Be finishing their honeymoon.

Next week they are expected home,
  And Jane has gone down to prepare;
The boys write word they are to come,
  And thus all meet together there.

Wife, children, sister! one and all—
  How happy they'll that evening be!
Will any idle word recall
  A single memory of me?

Ah! better not perhaps for him!
  Regret and joy are strangely blent;
May God fill his cup to the brim
  With happiness—mine with content.

I would not change the lot I chose
  With any loved and loving wife;
My heart its own deep secret knows,
  One golden thread runs through my life.

A box of summer mignonette
  Sends its soft fragrance through the room;
Old memories crowd its message, yet
  They're memories sweet as its perfume.

August 30th. Morecomb Grange.

How I have lived throughout to-day,
  And yet have strength to think and write,
I know not; all seems far away—
  A dream that's haunting me to-night.

A wild weird dream of anguished pain—
  Too sudden awful to be true;
That comes again and yet again,
  With Truth's wan features peering through.

I cannot sit down still and weep—
  Tears are no solace for such pain;
They've left me, as they say, to sleep—
  Sleep! with this throbbing heart and brain.

I dare not *think*, I'll try to write
  The agony of this day's tale;
But what my heart must bear to-night
  I cannot write, for words would fail.

This morning (I was quite alone)
  A telegram was brought to me;
I saw 'twas urgent from its tone—
  'A train leaves yours at ten to three.

'Clifton is ill—be sure to come.'
  A second followed on the first;
It ran, 'Set out at once from home,'
  And then I feared the very worst.

But how I left, how I came here,
  I hardly know—I hardly knew;
My very soul was sick with fear
  As I drove up the avenue.

The house looked wretched in its state,
  The avenue was spread with straw.
Oh! God, if I have come too late,
  I thought, with horror-stricken awe.

The door was opened ere I knocked,
  'Oh! miss,' said Jones, 'thank God, you're here.
He's much the same—oh! weren't you shocked?
  It's merciful it happened near.

'He is amongst us all at last,
  Poor gentleman; we'll see him die.
We all thought once—ah! well, that's past.
  There! there! Miss Peyce, you mustn't cry.

'You know about it all, of course—
  What! not a word?' thus on he ran,
And made me listen by sheer force,
  Poor, honest, garrulous old man.

It seems some horses ran away
  And, dashing round a corner, threw
Camilla down, or so they say,
  For *how* it happened no one knew.

He caught the horses by the rein,
  And saved his wife! *how*, none can tell;
Ere he could free himself again,
  His hand gave way—he slipped, and fell.

Off tore the horses at full speed,
  Wildly and madly on their way;
Camilla stood from danger freed—
  Insensible and crushed he lay!

Her life was bought with his. In vain
  I gave my heart's best hopes to save
His life from sorrow, grief, or pain—
  My very care has dug his grave.

'Who was it sent for me, I asked?'
  'Oh! missus wanted long ago;
(Poor soul! She's downright overtasked)
  But Mrs. Courtenay, she said *No.*

'All yesterday he raved of you;
  He wandered very much towards night;
But sometimes he was conscious too,
  And begged of missus so to write.

'This morning he's as clear as clear,
  And asked so piteous if they'd sent,
That missus said you'd soon be here,
  And then, poor dear, he seemed content.'

'Is that Miss Peyce, Jones?' said a voice.
  'I fear I hurried you to-day;
But life and death admit no choice—
  In his state one dare not delay.'

Haggard and wan, with swollen eyes,
  Shorn of each insolence and grace,
I gazed at her in mute surprise!
  It could *not* be Camilla's face!

'Poor girl! how ill you look,' she said.
  'This trouble has aged you by years.'
'Is there *no* hope?' She shook her head,
  And burst into a flood of tears.

I let her weep, my tears were dry;
  But hers were a relief I knew.
She roused herself up, by-and-by,
  'Oh! dear, I never thought of you.

'There's luncheon laid, come in with me.'
  'I couldn't eat.' 'Ay, but you must;
Just try, 'tis a necessity—
  A glass of sherry and a crust.

'He's sleeping now, you cannot go
  Until he wakes up once again;
Do come with me, you need it so.
  Who's that? oh! it's only Jane.'

Jane, too, looked worn, but she was cold,
  As if her heart was made of stone;
She greeted me just as of old,
  And asked me if I came alone.

'My brother somehow wished for you,'
  She went on frigidly to say;
'He wanders rather,' then I knew
  She meant he wandered yesterday.

'My dear Camilla, do lie down,
  You're quite worn out—I'll see to Clare;
The doctors won't be here from town
  Till half-past four—you've time to spare.'

'I cannot rest,' Camilla said,
  In such a weary heart-sick tone;
'I'll come with you, my heart's like lead—
  I cannot bear to be alone.'

That luncheon was a wretched meal;
  Each bore up for the other's sake;
Each feigned a calm she did not feel,
  Then nurse said Clifton was awake.

The few words seemed to pierce my heart,
  I gave a sort of gasping sigh ;
Thus surely the condemned must start,
  The hour they are led forth to die.

'Come with me, Clare,' Camilla said,
  (She never called me 'Clare' before) ;
'Tread lightly, dear, it hurts his head,
  Our very step across the floor.'

Before we reached his room she paused,
  And took me gently in her arms ;
'Ah ! Clare,' she said, 'we've often caused
  Each other jealous vague alarms.

'But try to love me, *for his sake*,
  You're his in heart, if I'm in name ;
This trouble all old piques must break—
  In grief, poor child, we are the same.'

Tears choked my answer, but I threw
  My arms round her, and closely pressed
My hated rival, and I knew
  She felt all I'd have fain expressed.

Pushing the door with cautious touch,
  And hardly breathing, in we crept;
Oh! God we've loved him far too much:
  Our idol from its shrine is swept.

The servants, hushed and white with fear,
  The house so silent in its gloom,
All spoke Death's presence very near,
  But more than all this darkened room.

A few rays of the August sun,
  Stole stealthily along the floor;
Emblems of life with bliss o'errun,
  But now shut out for evermore.

White as the sheets, and racked with pain,
  Helpless as any new-born child,
Lay Clifton, but 'twas not in vain
  I'd come, he knew me and he smiled.

'Dearest,' Camilla said, 'here's Clare,
  I think you'd like to be alone;'
And then before I was aware,
  She kissed me lightly, and was gone.

And then! ah! there was no disguise—
  The time for all disguise had passed;
We looked into each other's eyes,
  And knew and felt the truth at last.

'Then you did love me, little Clare?
  Say so, my darling, in this hour,
When life has so few sands to spare,
  This world's temptations no more power.'

And as the rock at Moses' rod
  In streams of living water gushed,
So to the dying and our God,
  Forth from my heart my secret rushed.

'Loved you! oh! Clifton, 'twas for you
  I gave up all that made life sweet;
Glad to be thought unkind, untrue,
  To fling life's treasures at your feet.

'I was not fit to be your wife,
  And so, my love, I stood aside,
Thinking by that to crown your life
  With one so suited for your bride.'

'Kiss me then, darling, once again,
Oh! do not grieve so for me, Clare;
'Tis for the best,'—he stopped, for Jane,
Nurse, and Camilla all stood there.

The darkened room, their cautious tread,
Had brought them on us by surprise,
Until they stood beside the bed—
Jane's wrath was flashing from her eyes.

'Camilla, dear,' she cried, 'don't stay;
This scene is terrible for you;
Let me implore you, come away,'
While poor nurse called out, 'Hush, ma'am, do.'

But with her arm fast round me thrown,
Camilla said, 'I see all, dear;
Do make them leave us quite alone—
Only we three are wanted here.'

Then almost in its usual tone,
The words rang out so strong and plain,
Clifton said, 'Leave us quite alone,
We want no interference, Jane.'

She knew she dared not disobey,
  For any scene might cause his death ;
Trembling with rage, she went away,
  Muttering, ' For shame !' below her breath.

And we two knelt there, side by side,
  Each losing with *him* all of life,
Each to be near *him* satisfied,
  Forgotten rivalry and strife.

Loving too deeply for a thought
  Of self, or selfish grief to rise,
By one strong bond together brought,
  In one strong cause to sympathise.

Into her hands his love I poured,
  Because for *him*—I deemed it best ;
Back to my heart she has restored
  That love, to give *his* spirit rest.

His happiness we seek, not ours,
  And, knit by a new solemn tie,
I see in these last precious hours,
  She loved as faithfully as I.

We knelt some time in silence there,
  Then Clifton gave a hand to each,
'Poor little wife—poor little Clare,'
  He said in faltering feeble speech.

'You must not grieve like this for me,
  Both of you love me far too well;
Two nobler hearts can never be
  Than those I'm forced to bid farewell.

'Camilla, dear one, take my hand,
  And let me hear you truly say
That you forgive, and understand
  All that you saw and heard to-day.'

'Forgive!' she said, 'my whole heart aches,
  For that poor child's grief-clouded life;
For even if mine with sorrow breaks,
  At least, at least, I've been your wife.

'Those few bright weeks of love and bliss,
  No future grief can take away;
It is enough, I lived for this,
  It was too glorious to stay.

'You thought me worthy of your home,
  Your trust, your confidence, esteem;
As years rolled on, love might have come,
  And realised my girlhood's dream.

'But oh! my husband, my heart's blood
  I'd give, just once to hear you say,
Had you been spared, you *might* have loved,
  As you have loved Clare Peyce to-day.'

Then as she bent her face to his,
  He kissed her, stroked her poor pale brow,
And whispered, '*Life* brought nought like this,
  I never loved you, sweet, *till now.*'

I did not grudge her that, oh! *no,*
  What! grudge balm to a breaking heart;
My tears began at once to flow,
  But 'twas her sorrow made them start.

I felt no longer I dare stay,
  Hers were the last few threads of life;
I kissed them, softly stole away,
  And left the husband and the wife.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

Sevenoaks. June 19th.

Just twenty-nine to-day! Ah me!
I see some grey amongst my hair;
And know I never more can be
The belle they vaunted everywhere.

I've read the diary I kept,
In the old days—ten years ago;
Not that its memories have slept,
But Time must heal the sharpest woe.

Camilla is a widow still,
But will not be one long, they say;
'Who's tapping at my window sill?'
A tiny voice says, 'Hawold Gwey.'

'Come in, my godson! What! all those
Bright golden buttercups for me;
A pansy, and a China rose,
A dandelion, and sweet pea.

'A note, too, from mamma!' she says,
  'Dear Clare, my brother Fred is here;
He's always raving in your praise,
  Do come to meet him, like a dear.'

'Now Harold, pet, run off and say,
  With godma's love, she is afraid,
She cannot come across to-day,
  And that she is a sworn old maid.'

Off speeds my messenger—I know
  His errand will be truly done;
My heart flies back to long ago,
  Clifton! *I* have no loves but one.

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